

The end of the sociological studies

Despite the many contributions of the human dependency and socio-economic studies to the work of the SCS with the American Indian populations, the backlash against the presence of anthropologists and sociologists in the Soil Conservation Service began in earnest in May 1937 with the reorganization of TC-BIA under Allan Harper, its new director. The regionalization of TC-BIA's technical personnel was accompanied by a shift in the emphasis of the sociological studies. Despite the caveats that "In the first year's work...it was found that technically correct erosion control and land use program, in order to be effective, had to be adapted to the ability of the Indian land owners to carry them out..."; that, "In all of the affected regions the discovery of methods of making erosion-control and conservative land-use plans effective on a watershed or community basis was found to be the most difficult part of the total task..."⁶⁴ and despite the stated intent to focus the efforts of TC-BIA on the solution of these problems, the new memorandum of understanding undercut the organization and work of the Socio-Economic Survey unit. The memorandum called for technical teams to come under the jurisdiction of the various regions in which they functioned, but the regional conservators, with few exceptions, were less than eager to have the TC-BIA and its sociological teams invade their territory.⁶⁵ After the regionalization, a series of intensive reconnaissance studies would be performed "in conjunction with agricultural economists and rural sociologists,"⁶⁶ rather than anthropologists, to determine what more detailed studies

⁶⁴ "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Future Organization and Work Program of Unit for Technical Cooperation - Bureau of Indian Affairs," May 10, 1937, pp. 3-4; AO Organization Correspondence; TC-BIA General Files; RG 114; NA.

⁶⁵ Letter, Walter Woehlke to Alida Bowler, October 23, 1936; SE General; TC-BIA General Files; RG 114; NA.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

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should be performed. What this meant was an end to the broad cultural studies that had been envisioned and performed before. The new work would be more pragmatic and narrowly focused upon “the task of preparing erosion-control and conservative land-use plans that can be put into effective operation on the Indian reservations....”⁶⁷ The studies envisioned by Shevky and his compatriots, which were ambitious and admittedly beyond the scope of the SCS work, were no longer welcomed by the SCS, which returned to its earlier utilitarian approach to addressing the social aspects of soil conservation. The anthropologists who had dominated the TC-BIA social and economic studies up to that point were entirely turned over to the Indian Service which was then required to furnish the full-time service of one social anthropologist and one junior agricultural economist, along with various other technical personnel to TC-BIA. The proposed payroll for the Human Dependency and Economic Survey staff for 1938 included six soil conservationists; two agricultural economists; two rural sociologists; one agronomist; two engineering draftsmen; six aides, clerks and typists; and no anthropologists, sociologists, or specialists in American Indian culture or ethnology. The Administrative section, however, did retain a social ethnologist as well as Ruth Underhill as

Although the objectives and form of the human dependency studies of TC-BIA had been remade by the reorganization, the studies continued under Hugh Calkins and Shevky in Region 8 for a short period. Then, at some point in mid- to late-1938, the documentary evidence is poor, the Human Survey Section of Region 8 was subsumed under the Division of Conservation Economics, though Shevky retained the position of director and it appears that the same type of work continued at least for a time. This administrative change may have been due to the continued opposition to the work of sociologists in the SCS.

PART II: 1953-1994

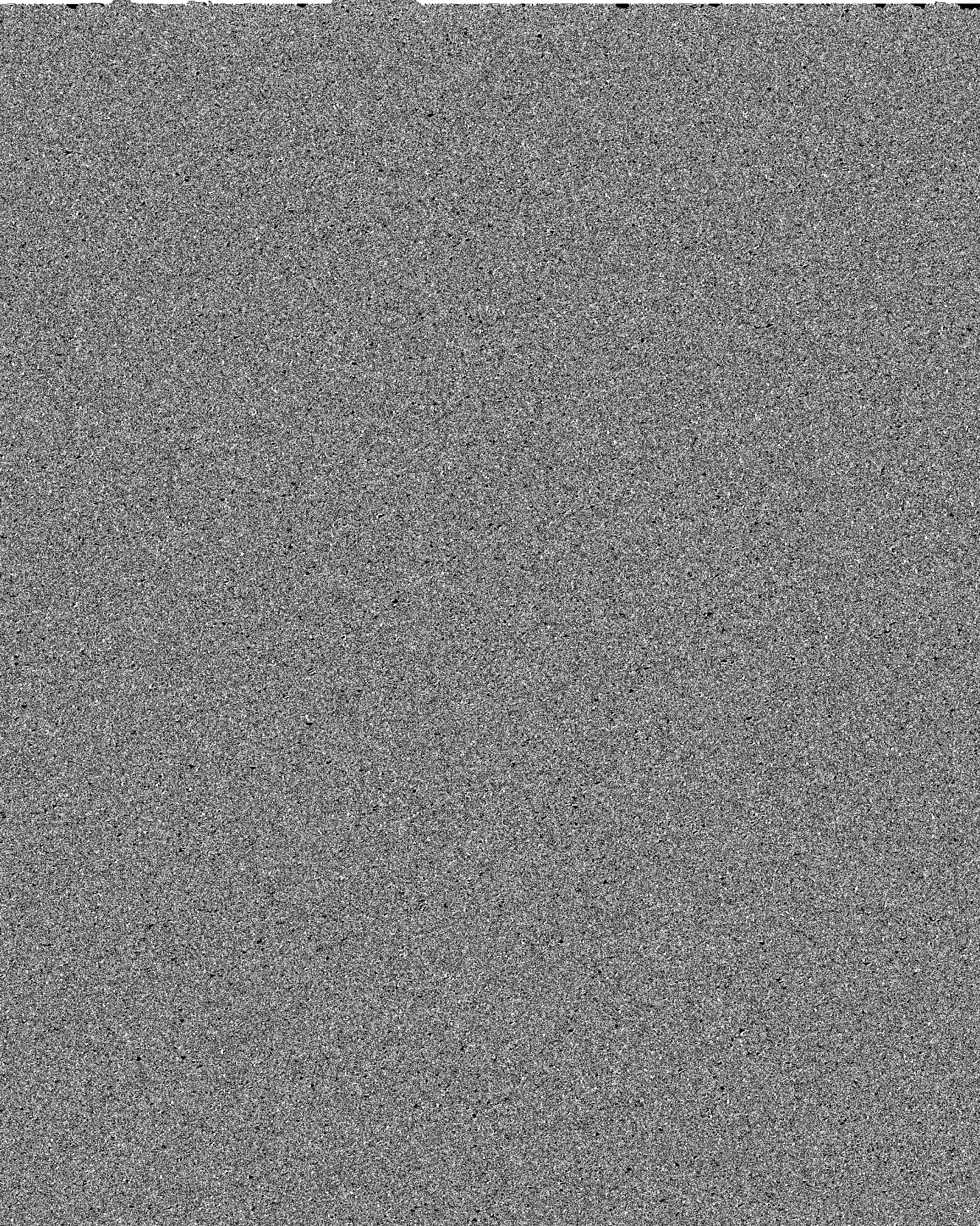
The land-use problems of the American Indians persisted long after SCS attention to them had ceased. In 1940, a Presidential reorganization plan transferred all conservation programs on lands under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Department of the Interior (USDOI) to that Department and the SCS projects on tribal lands were handed over to the BIA. However, even before the SCS was formally precluded from working on the reservations, the Conservation District system that SCS had established in 1937, which was organized under state law, had effectively prevented new SCS projects on tribal lands. Over the years, the BIA, who replaced SCS on the reservations, was unable to solve the ongoing problems of land use, subsistence, and economic underdevelopment that plagued the American Indians.

While their land was managed by the BIA, the American Indians had little say in its use and development. As the SCS had in the 1930s, the BIA planned conservation and land use by constructing new organizational systems for decisionmaking on the reservations without consulting the tribal members. Kimball and Provinse's warning in the 1940s had proved prophetic: "The continued stubborn attempts to improve a system of political or social organization without due regard to the traditional behavior and basic principles creating cooperative relations can lead only to failure."⁷⁰ Tribal members were alienated from the planning process and from their land; this alienation led to abuse and neglect of the reservations' natural resources. By the time that SCS programs resumed on the Navajo reservation in the 1970s, visiting SCS employees found badly needed and decades-old irrigation and drainage systems and conservation measures in total disrepair.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Kimball and Provinse, "Navajo Social Organization...", 24.

⁷¹ Telephone interview with Doug Sellers, former Indian Liaison (1984-1989), Soil Conservation Service, Friday, August 25, 1995.

Getting back to work on the reservations



State of Arizona in 1957. However, according to the existing interpretations of its authority, the SCS was unable to perform conservation activities on the tribal lands, despite their inclusion in a conservation district.⁷³ Beginning around 1970, prompted by the Civil Rights Act, Indian leaders throughout the country began pressing for increased USDA and SCS assistance to the reservations.⁷⁴ In 1975, the Indian Self-Determination Act (PL 94-638) was passed, allowing Indian tribes to adopt standard conservation legislation on their reservations under tribal code. This provided a legal basis for the tribes to establish their own conservation districts. The same year, SCS issued a policy stating that programs available to individuals under PL 74-46, passed April 27, 1935, were available to Indian Reservations, tribal Governments, and tribal members. However, the SCS was still, in practice, prohibited from engaging in work on lands under USDOJ jurisdiction. The internal contradictions of SCS policy were obvious.

On July 1, 1977 the USDA Office of General Counsel issued a reinterpretation of the 1940 presidential reorganization⁷⁵ which permitted SCS work on tribal lands situated within the boundaries of a conservation district. On November 28 of the same year, a formal Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Parker District and the USDA. SCS assistance to the Parker Valley SWCD commenced on August 13, 1978 with the establishment of

⁷³ This was the accepted interpretation, but in fact, in 1953, the Comptroller General Lindsay Warren published an opinion which allowed the SCS to provide assistance on lands under the jurisdiction of the Depart-

the SCS Parker field office.⁷⁶ The following year, Jim Crane and Frank Martinez, the staff at Parker, began a massive cooperative study of the area and drew up an ambitious plan of work, much of which has been implemented. With the assistance and support of Bill Martin, the BIA representative at Parker, farmers were soon approaching the SCS for assistance.

Despite the success of the Parker office and the growing eagerness of other reservations for SCS assistance, it was not until 1980 that the Secretary of Agriculture issued a memorandum extending eligibility for all USDA services to the American Indians on tribal lands.⁷⁷ Between 1980 and 1992 six conservation districts were organized under tribal law, all in Arizona.⁷⁸ However, despite the huge increases in the amount of land serviced by the SCS (in Arizona land eligible for SCS services increased from 22.3 million acres to 42.2 million acres⁷⁹ overnight), and SCS resource inventories which estimated that 80% of all

⁷⁶USDA, Economics, Statistics & Cooperative Service, Forest Service, and Soil Conservation Service, "Plan of Work: Colorado River Indian Reservation River Basin Cooperative Study," March 1979; Colorado River Indian Reservation (CRIT) file; NAC-SW. The SCS Parker Field Office deserves special mention because of its unique relationship with the SWCD, the BIA and the Reservation. CRIT and the Parker Valley SWCD have a unique history in terms of their multi-tribal orientation, early establishment, and in the particular relationship between the SWCD and the SCS. Since 1978, when SCS and Parker signed their Memorandum of Understanding and the established the first Indian field office, the Parker office has had the same District Conservationist—Jim Crane. Frank Martinez, a member of CRIT and the Parker SWCD Board also came to work for the Parker field office in 1978 and remained there until his recent retirement. Frank's ties to community, the unusual partnership that Frank and Jim developed with the BIA representative in the area, and Jim's long-term presence on the reservation allowed them to build up the personal relationships so essential to effective work on the reservations. They also have an intimate knowledge of the political processes as well as the special needs of the reservation. They have been able to implement comprehensive studies of the

Indian land needed conservation work, there was no increase in staffing when work began on the Indian lands and the SCS budget was actually decreased in certain years.⁸⁰

Over the decades, the SCS's approach toward conservation in general had changed and despite the limited manpower and funds that SCS could offer, the change meant considerable improvement for the American Indians. When programs were re-instituted on the

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able and how to ask for it. For many of the American Indians, outside of the well-served Navajo Reservation, local SCS offices were inaccessible, both physically and culturally. Besides the unavoidable complications of location and communication, some staff at SCS field offices lacked sensitivity to the needs and interests of the American Indians, maintaining racial stereotypes about the American Indians.⁸¹ At the same time, the extension of SCS services to Indians created competition with white land-users who had been the traditional beneficiaries of SCS assistance and who feared that assistance to Indian land users would reduce their share of the SCS's resources.⁸² This was one reason, aside from their assertion that they were sovereign entities separate from the states, that many tribes insisted on establishing their own conservation districts under tribal code rather than joining existing conservation districts organized under state law.

⁸¹ Doug Sellers interview.

⁸² See Draft Policy Memorandum on Assistance to Indian and Bureau of Indian Affairs, 5/16/77; NAC-SW.

Old and new issues in culture and conservation

The change in SCS's administrative approach to conservation on the reservations did not end the problems of cultural misunderstanding that had complicated its earlier efforts; so in 1988, SCS's National Sociologist organized a workshop in Phoenix, Arizona to address



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Successful SCS staff were frequently promoted out of field positions, leaving new and often inexperienced field staff to reestablish the network of personal relations that were so important for effective work on the reservation. The conference seemed to suggest that the cultural

gulf that had complicated early conservation work had widened rather than narrowed over

despite the best efforts of the Government, only one-third of the respondents were familiar with SCS programs, and nearly all of those familiar with the programs had participated in them. The main reason given for lack of participation was a lack of information, and 86% of the respondents were interested in receiving training in the USDA programs available to them. The survey put forth a number of recommendations for increasing participation by American Indians. Among these were an information strategy designed specifically for the American Indian communities with "information and assistance which is culturally sensitive and utilizes Indian...communications networks," and an orientation and training module to educate SCS personnel about American Indians and "to break down any real or artificial barriers to their full participation" in SCS programs.⁸⁶ Clearly, the major obstacles to SCS work on the reservation continued to be problems of communication, sensitivity, and prejudice: problems of culture.

Recognizing this, the SCS initiated a series of conferences in 1991 to raise cultural awareness among SCS employees. The "Harmony Workshops" placed a medium sized group of SCS personnel (50-100) in an experiential learning environment where they were instructed by American Indians in the history and culture of the tribes in their region, in cultural and behavioral norms, in American Indian religion and mythology, particularly as it related to the land, and most important, sensitized to the differences in American Indian and "dominant society" concepts that affected planning and working relationships, like time, future and present, and individual behavior and values. Though the workshops received high praise from most participants, those people most closely involved in ongoing work with the American Indians were more equivocal, reflecting that the workshops were more oriented toward fostering an appreciation for American Indian culture (a worthy goal) than teaching the skills and knowledge necessary to work with the American Indian populations on tribal lands.

⁸⁶USDA, SCS National Bulletin No. 300-1-6, su: LTP-Participation of Indians and Alaskan Natives in SCS Programs-Survey Report, March 6, 1991, attachment: report summary, p. 5; Assistance to American Indians; NAC-SW.

*The Navajo Nation: a case study*⁸⁷

In 1979, members of the Navajo Emergency Services Coordinating Committee approached the Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, with their concerns that the Navajo Nation was not being adequately served by the USDA. The most pressing needs that they identified were for planning funds to develop a comprehensive land use plan, a USDA office to be located on the Reservation in Window Rock specifically to service the Navajo Nation, and for a liaison who spoke Navajo to work under the direction of the tribal council to edu-

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nical advice and planning services, facilitating the passage of legislation and the formation of conservation districts, and building trust in the community between the SCS and the Navajo people. There was considerable enthusiasm for the programs which Parrill brought to the Reservation. In April 1979, he wrote, "I am continually meeting new people...and it continues to amaze and encourage me at [sic] their concern over their problems and their desire for